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ABSTRACT

A study examined the feasibility of alternative systems for making certain field-based vocational and technical education program improvement products available to educators. The materials in question were those program improvement products that are received on an unsolicited basis at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE), but that are not selected by the Center's Dissemination and Utilization (D&U) Program. During the study, efforts were made to determine the current availability of the products, to identify alternative ways of making the products available, to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system, and to recommend the most efficient and cost-effective approach. The following two approaches were identified: creation of a new on-line database for the D&U products and utilization of existing on-line public educational databases to make the products available. After thorough examination of the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system, it was recommended that the D&U products be incorporated into existing databases such as ERIC, the Vocational Education Curriculum Materials (VECM) database, and the Education Practice File. (Author/MN)

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DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION PRODUCT DATABASE FEASIBILITY STUDY

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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FOREWORD

Successful dissemination and utilization of educational products often depends upon easy identification and access. The vocational and technical education program improvement products reviewed and selected through the Dissemination and Utilization Program at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education are exemplary and need to be easily accessible. This feasibility study examined alternative systems for announcing and making these products readily available to vocational and technical educators.

The analysis was conducted in the Information Systems Division of the National Center under the direction of Joel H. Magisos. Wesley E. Budke, Director of the National Center Clearinghouse, prepared this analysis. Dr. Budke holds a Ph.D. in Agricultural Education from The Ohio State University and has been involved in vocational education information system development and educational product dissemination work at the national Center since 1970. Special recognition is given to project staff members Carl Oldsen, Judith Wagner, and Catherine Smith for their help in identifying the products, exploring alternative systems, and preparing the report.

Critiques of a preliminary draft of the paper were provided by C. Edward Brown, Indiana State Board of Vocational and Technical Education; Joyce Sawatzky, Oklahoma Curriculum and Instructional Materials Center; and Roy Butler and James Hamilton from the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. Janet Ray provided word processing assistance and final editing of the document was provided under the supervision of Janet Kiplinger of the National Center's Editorial Services.

The contribution of all of these individuals to the preparation of this report is appreciated. The reviewers should, however, in no way be held responsible for the viewpoints presented in this report. That responsibility rests solely with the author.

The funds for this effort were provided by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education.

Robert E. Taylor
Executive Director
The National Center for Research
in Vocational Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many field-based vocational and technical education program improvement products are received on a unsolicited basis at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. The products are screened by the Dissemination and Utilization (D&U) Program, guided by whether they pertain to federal and National Center priority topics such as sex equity, handicapped, and economic development. Other criteria include compatibility, quality of contents, cost-efficiency, research evidence of effectiveness, and most important, usability. Chosen products are announced, made available, and disseminated.

This feasibility study examines alternative systems for making those products that were reviewed, but not selected readily available to educators and makes recommendations to the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education. The study consisted of four steps: (1) to determine the current availability of the products, (2) to identify alternative ways of making the products available, (3) to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system, and (4) to recommend the most efficient and cost-effective approach.

Two approaches to making the products available were identified: (1) to create a new on-line database for the D&U products and (2) to make the D&U products available through existing on-line public educational databases.

After thorough examination of the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system, it was recommended that the D&U products be incorporated into existing databases. Use of existing databases such as ERIC, VECM, and the Education Practice File would eliminate or greatly reduce design and testing expenses, continuous processing and file maintenance commitments, and the need to acquaint users with the database and train them in how to access it.

DISSEMINATION AND UTILIZATION PRODUCT
DATABASE FEASIBILITY STUDY

The Dissemination and Utilization (D&U) Program at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education addresses the persistent problem of the effective exchange of information about research and development products among vocational educators. In response to this problem, the D&U Program identifies worthy field-based program improvement products and publicizes them nationwide. During this process, candidate materials are reviewed and selected on the basis of topical priorities, content, effectiveness, compatibility with existing programs, and cost.

The product selection process involves seven steps:

- Step 1: Initial Screening of Products--D&U Program staff screen three hundred to four hundred products each month. These products are unsolicited materials sent directly to the D&U Program; materials requested by D&U staff from brochures and reports; or products submitted to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ERIC), Resources in Vocational Education (RIVE), Resource Organizations and Meetings for Educators (ROME), and Vocational Education Curriculum Materials (VECM) databases. The initial screening is guided by whether they cover topics specified as vocational education legislative priorities (e.g., sex equity, handicapped) and National Center priorities, such as economic development, established by client input. About one in ten products reviewed is "screened in" for further evaluation.

- Step 2: Secure Complete Product Information--Each product "screened in" is carefully examined to make sure that all components (work sheets, handbooks) are included, that evaluative data are available, and that the product can be made available. All information is verified with the developer.

- Step 3: Internal Evaluation--The D&U professional staff review the "screened in" products and rank them based on the following criteria: effectiveness, compatibility, quality of contents, cost efficiency, and research evidence of effectiveness.

- Step 4: External Evaluation--Products receiving the higher staff rankings are reviewed by three field-based reviewers. They use the evaluation criteria listed in Step 3, but also place emphasis on "usability."

- Step 5: Selection (by D&U Staff)--The final selection of exemplary products for widespread review is made by D&U staff after weighing field-based reviews versus overall mix of products. Other contributing factors are theme, function, and user groups.

- Step 6: Preparation and Production of Product--After products are selected for widespread distribution, arrangements must be made to announce them and make them available. Collaborative agreements or memorandums of understanding are drafted between the developer and the Center to spell out clearly the responsibilities of the respective parties. The agreement spells out responsibility for product inventories and servicing requests.

- Step 7: Dissemination Activities--A promotional plan or dissemination activity is outlined for each product. Typically the plan will include such proactive activities as presentations at workshops, seminars, and conferences; displays at national and regional conferences; use of the product as resource materials; and promotional announcements in professional journals. Reactive activities include selected distribution to target audiences, response to written and telephone inquiries, and referrals to original developers.

From 1978 through 1982, forty-four research and development products were selected for special promotion to vocational and technical educators. These products addressed special needs populations, planning, evaluation, personnel development, energy, economic development, occupational instruction, dissemination strategies, basic skills, job placement, and vocational guidance. The selected products were directed toward the secondary, postsecondary, and adult education levels.

In the course of identifying and selecting the 44 exemplary vocational education program improvement products, over 1,100 products were acquired that passed the initial screening criteria. These products were shelved as a reference file for staff use at the National Center.

Need

Because these 1,100 plus products are considered the "cream of the crop" in terms of contributing to vocational education program improvement, it is important that they be available to educators. The purpose of this feasibility study was to explore the alternatives for making the material available on-line and to recommend the most efficient and cost-effective procedure for doing this.

The remainder of the report will describe the procedures used by National Center staff to review the materials, to determine their availability, to describe alternative ways of making the material available, and to recommend the most appropriate procedure.

Procedures

The process of determining the feasibility of designing and implementing a separate database for the Dissemination and Utilization (D&U) selected products was conducted in four major steps: (1) determine the current availability of the products, (2) identify alternative ways of making the products available, (3) analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system and (4) recommend the most efficient and cost-effective delivery system.

The first step in the analysis process was to identify the products, prepare bibliographic citations for each, and determine whether they were available through the ERIC system. The titles of each of the 1,112 products were checked in the ERIC title index to determine whether they were in ERIC. Seven hundred seventy-eight products (or 70 percent) were in the ERIC system. Examination of the ERIC acqusition records revealed that 167 products (or 15 percent) had been reviewed by ERIC subject matter specialists and not accepted for inclusion in the ERIC database, usually because of a unique format (puzzles, games, films, and videotapes). The other 167 products (or 15 percent) had not been received by the ERIC staff for review.

The second step was to identify alternative ways of making the products easily available to vocational and technical educators. Discussions were held with the staffs of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education; the National Center Clearinghouse; the Resource and Referral Service; and the D&U Program to identify viable system options. Two major system alternatives were identified:

1. To create a new on-line database for the D&U products

2. To make the D&U products available through existing on-line public educational databases

A third option, entering the materials in ERIC, then storing the descriptors and/or records for use at a later time, was explored with the staff of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. This option was not considered viable because it would require downloading of this section of the ERIC file onto a microcomputer. A downloaded file is no longer publicly accessible. Each of the options were carefully examined by the project staff to determine their respective advantages and disadvantages.

The next (third) step was to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each delivery system in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and cost.

The creation of a stand-alone database would allow easy identification of the D&U products because they would be the only materials in the file. However, development and maintenance of a new database is a complex, lengthy (six to eight months), and costly (up to twenty thousand dollars) process. It involves the formulation of file specifications to meet format and retrieval requirements, the design of load programs tailored to the specific file specifications, and the initial file loading. Procedures then need to be established to ensure the addition of new records to the file through a conscientious and continuous acquisitions system; duplicate entry checking; and file

maintenance associated with data entry, proofing, and file reloading. Preparation of a database guide is required so that users can search the system on-line and retrieve data in the format required. Also, the file is too small to become a public file, thus it has only controlled access by designated users. These users would need to be informed about and trained to use the database.

The majority of the tasks listed above would not be required, or at least the effort would be greatly minimized, if these materials were incorporated into an existing database(s) with operating procedures in place. The second system alternative relies upon this notion. Procedures would be initiated that would ensure that eligible D&U products are entered into the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system, the Vocational Education Curriculum Materials (VECM) database, or the Education Practice File which is sponsored by the National Institute of Education and operated by the San Mateo Educational Resource Center (SMERC). The advantages of this arrangement are: (1) no database design and testing costs are incurred, (2) processing would be done by the staffs of the operational databases, (3) public on-line file status has already been achieved, and (4) users are generally familiar with the existing databases. The major disadvantage of this delivery system is that the products will not be identified as part of the D&U Program. The need for an activity or additional resources for each of the two delivery systems was determined (see table 1).

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF NEEDED ACTIVITIES OR
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES BY DELIVERY SYSTEM

Additional Activity	New Database	Existing Databases
Designing and testing database	Yes	No
Processing time	Yes	No
Continuing maintenance cost	Yes	No
Securing public database status	Yes	No
Making materials available	Yes	No
Promoting the database and providing user training	Yes	No
Maintaining D&U product identity	Yes	No

Recommendations

The fourth and last procedural step in the feasibility study was to recommend the most efficient and cost-effective means of making the D&U products available to vocational and technical educators, as well as other interested audiences. Based upon the analysis of the advantages and disadvantages, th pluses in favor of using existing databases to make the D&U products available far outweighed the factors favoring a new database. The only significant element favoring a new database was the ability to relate the products to the D&U Program. There seems to be no strong need to do this as long as the products are available to make vocational and technical education program improvements. Use of existing databases such as ERIC, VECM, and the Education Practice File eliminates or greatly reduces design and testing expenses, continuous processing and file maintenance commitments, and the need to acquaint users with the database and train them to access it. If existing databases are to be used, only minor adjustments in existing processing procedures are necessary to ensure entry of eligible materials into the ERIC system, the VECM database, or the Education Practice File.

As of this year, the D&U staff reviews all products that are acquired by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. Any solicited or unsolicited products coming directly to the D&U Program are cycled through the ERIC review process. Vocational and technical education curriculum materials are flagged for possible entry into the VECM database. Materials that are application or practice oriented, especially those that do not qualify for entry into the ERIC or VECM databases, are reviewed for possible submission to the Education Practice File.

RECOMMENDATION: As a result of this study, it is recommended that the D&U products be incorporated into the ERIC system, the VECM database, or the Education Practice File.

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